

Islamic Village Stories

My Egyptian Village

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Written & Illustrated by
Luqman Nagy

Goodword**kidz**
Helping you build a family of faith

This book is dedicated to
the kind people of Egypt.

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E-mail: info@goodwordbooks.com
Printed in India
First published 2004
© Goodword Books 2004

www.goodwordbooks.com

INTRODUCTION

Egypt, also known as *Misr* in Arabic, is quite unlike any other Muslim country. For almost five thousand years there has been an unbroken historical record of people inhabiting this land on the banks of River Nile.

It is along this ribbon of blue, amidst a bright yellow desert landscape that the village of Al-Khayriyyah is located. This is the home of 'Abd al-Kareem, an extremely gentle Egyptian boy who is very keen to show you around his village.

Since the time of the Companion of the Prophet 'Amr ibn al-'As (*radhi Allahu 'anhu*), Egypt has been a Muslim country. Important Islamic dynasties, such as the Tulunid, Fatimid, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman, all once ruled this land. Kingdoms, sultanates and empires rose and fell but the River Nile never ceased flowing nor did the hard-working people of the countryside—*fellahin*—cease tilling the fertile fields along its banks.

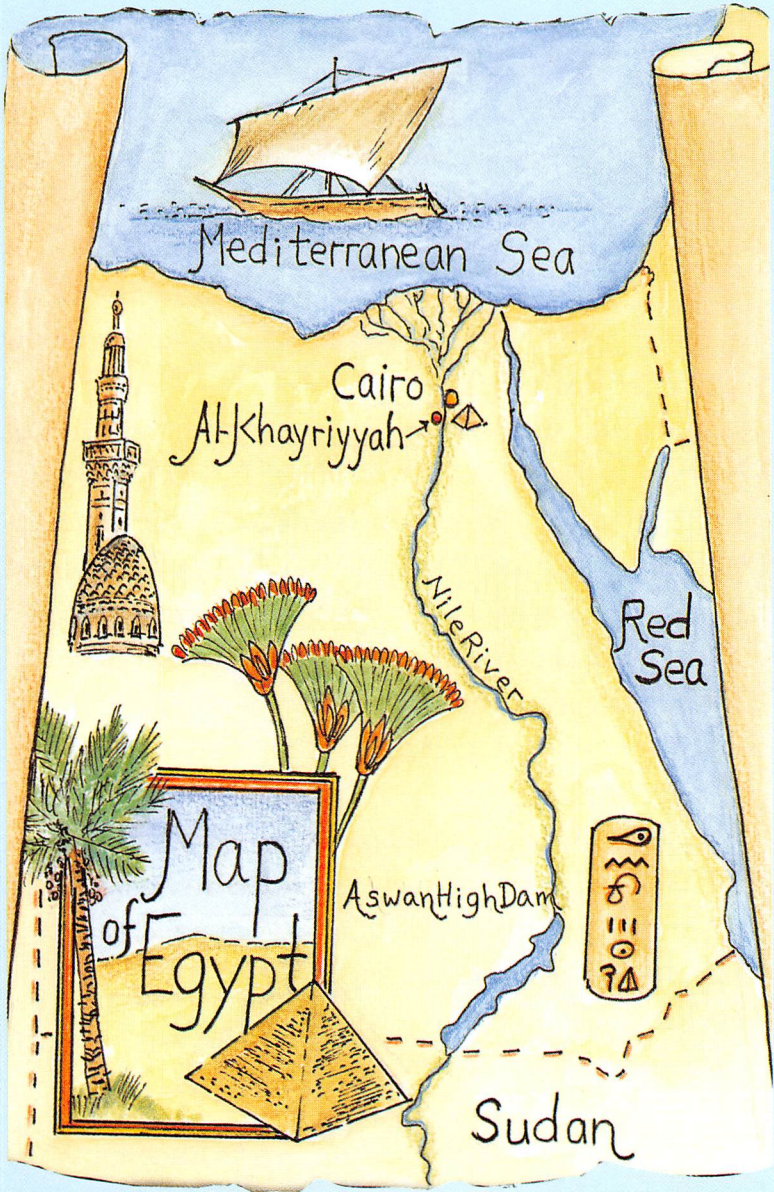
Al-Khayriyyah is a village of *fellahin*. Their lives have changed little over the years which has helped them preserve many old Islamic traditions and practices.

Now turn the page and let 'Abd al-Kareem introduce you to his colourful Egyptian world.

To you all my salaams.

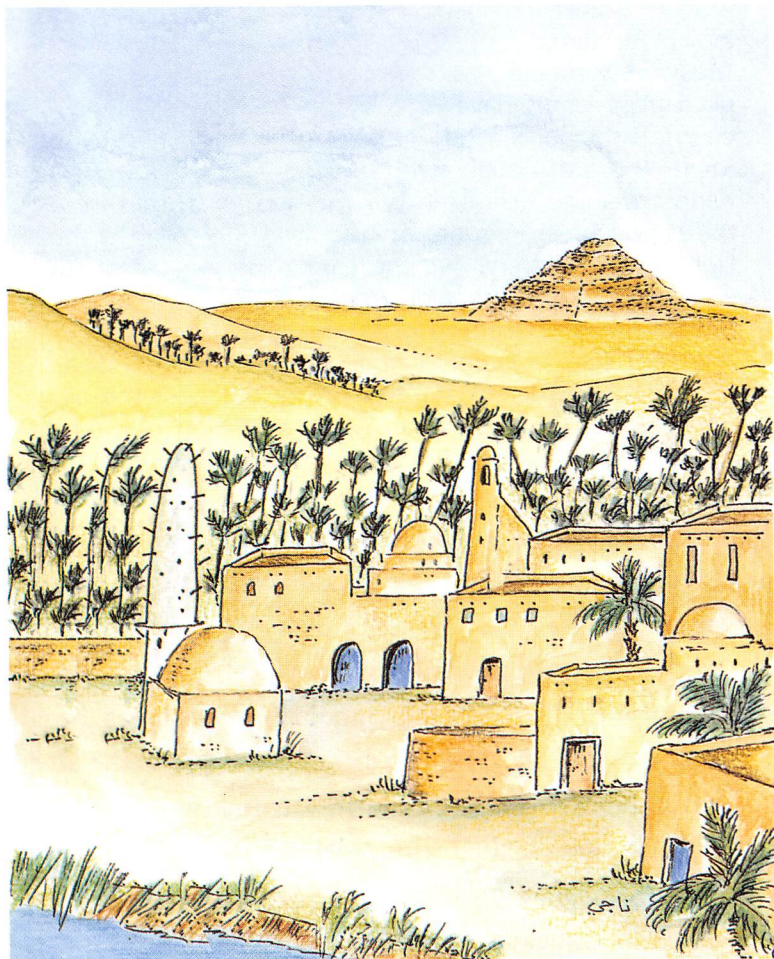
Luqman Nagy
May 2003

King Fahd University
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia



1. History of My Village

My name is ‘Abd al-Kareem and I am a Muslim, *al-Hamdulillah*. I live in a beautiful Egyptian village. My village is called Al-Khayriyyah, because the people who first lived here were “charitable”—they always offered aid or *khayr* to those in need. “Welcome to my village!”



Old Mosque Lamp

Here is a beautiful glass mosque lamp or misbah that was made in Egypt almost seven hundred years ago during the time of the Mamluks. Before we had electricity in our village, lamps like this were lit each evening in our mosque.

Today, very simple plain glass lamps have electric light bulbs inside them. This old misbah still

hangs over the mihrab in our mosque. Allah says in the Holy Qur'an in surah an-nur, ayah 35: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is, as it were, that of a niche containing a lamp; the lamp is [enclosed] in glass, the glass [shining] like a radiant star: [a lamp] lit from a blessed tree—an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west—the oil whereof [is so bright that it] would well-nigh give light [of itself] even though fire had not touched it: light upon light!"



or, as we say in Arabic, "*ahlan wa sahlan wa marhaban fee baytee.*"

As you can see, my village is not far from the ancient step pyramid of Zoser at Saqqara, the oldest of all Egyptian pyramids. We live on the banks of the deep and wide Nile River. We read in our history books that my country was called the "gift of the Nile" by the ancient Greeks. Egypt is a desert country, but *al-Hamdulillah*, because of the Nile River, farmers for

thousands of years have been able to grow wheat and other crops to support its population.

My father owns a herd of water buffalo (or *gamoosa* in Arabic). These animals resemble big horned cows. They love to eat all the wonderful fresh green grass that grows in the fields near our village. As a result, water buffalo grow very large. My father sells buffalo milk to the city where it is used to make delicious white feta cheese. In late afternoon, the buffalo like to cool themselves in the canal near the river. We sometimes jump in and help scrub them down!

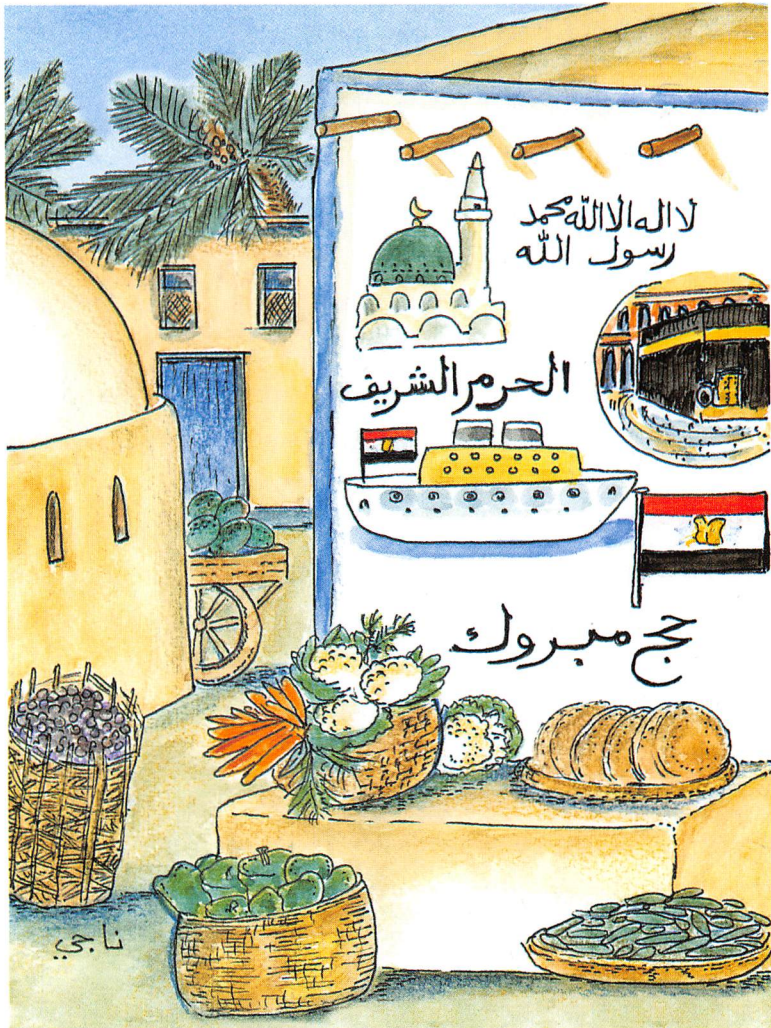
My father tells me that Al-Khayriyyah is a very old village. He says that perhaps people from our village provided workforce for the construction of Zoser's step pyramid almost 5,000 years ago. This imposing and magnificent structure had a great influence on our lives. We used to sit and play in its shade, and often wondered what life had been like so many years ago.

Today, we speak Arabic, but a form of the ancient Egyptian language is still used by the Copts, or Egyptian Christians, in their church services. There are some Coptic villages in the southern part of Egypt.

Everyone in our village owns a vegetable garden. The fertile soil, the bountiful water supply and the hot Egyptian sun all help produce incredibly large sweet carrots and huge white heads of cauliflower, my favourite! *Masha' Allah*—even the dates in our village are unusually large. You can see some of our date trees just behind the village houses. *Al-Hamdulillah*, we believe that Allah has truly blessed our home-land—*Misr*.

2. My Mud House

Here is my mud house. I was born here twelve years ago. We still build our houses using the local earth mixed with straw. A few villages have tried using more modern building materials like concrete and tin roofing



Beautiful Gold Dinar

This is a beautiful gold dinar from the time of the Fatimids. The Fatimid dynasty originated in Tunisia, but they founded in 969 CE the city of al-qahirah (Cairo), the capital city of Egypt. Only Fatimid coins have three concentric circles inscribed on them. The innermost circle always displays the kalimah al-shahadah as seen on this coin.



but their houses are not as comfortable to live in as ours. Our houses are cool during the hot summer months and cozy in the winter evenings.

A famous Egyptian architect, Hassan Fathy from Cairo, our capital city, once visited our village. With him was a group of young university students of architecture. They took photographs of our house and asked my father many questions about its construction. Hassan Fathy was not a villager, but he understood the importance of traditional earth building techniques—and of keeping this technique alive. Today, his students encourage people to use earth as a building material. Hassan Fathy told us that the design of our village

houses was very ancient. For example, in front of our house, is a long baked mud-bench called a *mastaba* in Arabic. This was a feature of all ancient Egyptian houses. Today, we of course are Muslims, *al-Hamdulillah*. The days of the pharaohs are buried in the past. We can no longer even imagine worshipping any god other than Allah, *Rabb al-Ameen*, the True Deity who sent to us His final Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, as a mercy to all nations.

It has been the custom in our village to work very hard and save money so that one day we might be able to visit the Holy Cities of Makkah and Madinah. *Al-Hamdulillah*, my father and mother made their *hajj*, or pilgrimage, two years ago. Our house is now known as a “*hajj* house”. ‘Abd al-Rahman, a village artist, is always busy whenever anyone returns from the *hajj*. My father hired him to paint colourful scenes on the outside of our house. In Al-Khayriyyah village, there are several houses like ours. I actually helped ‘Abd al-Rahman paint some of the pictures; for example, I painted the *kiswah*, or black covering over the *kaa’bah* and the Egyptian flag on the passenger ship.

Insha’Allah, one day we will all be able to visit Holy Makkah and perform *hajj* and meet with millions of fellow Muslims on the Plain of Arafat on that glorious day, and offer our heartfelt prayers knowing that they will all be accepted.

3. Our Food

In Arabic, we are known as *fellahin* or “people of the countryside”. Our life is hard but beautiful, and we always offer thanks to Allah.

Our day begins with the *adhan*, or call to morning prayer, but quite often it is our rooster that wakes us



up! Our mosque is in the middle of Al-Khayriyyah so that everyone can easily come for prayer. After *salat al-fajr*, we always read from the Holy Qur'an. Before starting our day, reading from *kitab Allah* strengthens our *imaan* and our desire to be good servants of Allah.

We all have chores to do immediately after prayers. The water buffalo need to be milked and their milk is to be quickly transported to the city for sale. I collect the eggs our chickens have laid and sometimes sell them in the week-end market. My mother and sisters prepare for us a hearty breakfast. Our breakfast table is full of delicious and nutritious food, *masha' Allah*.

The staple food of all *fellahin* is *aysh*, a wonderful coarse whole wheat flat bread and *ful medammes*, stewed brown fava beans with salt and lemon juice. We also have some white goat's cheese and gigantic fresh radishes. This morning, my mother has prepared a very special Egyptian drink—*karkadi* or hibiscus tea. This is a delicious bright red drink made from the dried petal-like parts of the *karkadi* plant. In Ramadhan, we very often break our fast with a refreshing glass of hibiscus tea which can be drunk hot or cold.

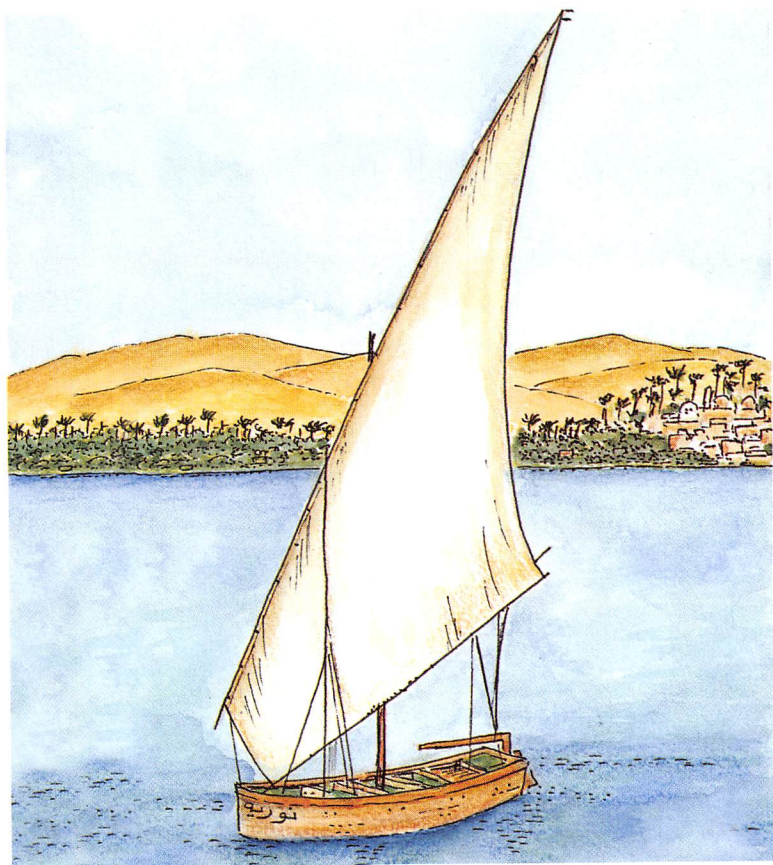
The dark green soup you see on the table is another Egyptian favourite—*melokkbiyah*. This is a very healthy vegetable, something like spinach. It has been eaten in Egypt for thousands of years.

Egypt has always had its *fellahin*. *Masha' Allah*, we helped to build the pyramids and other ancient monumental buildings without the use of modern technology. We also supplied the food to the pyramid

builders. Our *baladi* or traditional home-cooked food keeps us strong and healthy, *al-Hamdulillah*.

4. Our River Nile

Al-Hamdulillah, the River Nile flows through our country. It is the longest river in the world and for thousands of years has been our life blood.



In the past, the Nile would flood each summer when the snows of the *jibaal al-qamar* (“mountains of the moon”) melted in the highlands of East Africa. Most years, flood waters brought a rich layer of wet mud that irrigated and enriched the fields. In some regions, four or five crops could be grown in one year!

In 1967, the Aswan High Dam project was completed. In the south of Egypt, the Nile River was dammed for the first time creating the world’s largest reservoir—Lake Nasser. Today, the Aswan High Dam



An old ceramic Mamluk tile
found in our mosque.

controls the flow of the Nile River. Flooding no longer occurs. *Fellahin* all along its banks make use of the river water for their farming.

In the picture, you can see a *felucca* , the traditional broad-sail boat of the Nile. It belongs to my uncle who named it after my aunt: *Nuriyyah* . When my uncle does not have to deliver goods up or down the river, he lets us sail with him in his boat. In our part of Egypt, there are no longer any crocodiles or hippopotamuses in the river. The Nile crocodile does live along the river banks in the south. When the Greeks first came to our country more than two thousand years ago, they had never seen a hippo before. As a result, they called this large water-dwelling mammal a “river horse” or *hippo potamus* in Greek.

Each summer, my uncle takes me and my family on his *felucca* and we spend the entire day sailing. This is where I learned to swim. I can now dive very deep, too! The water here is cleaner and fish are found in plenty. I swim a lot and catch a lot of fish in the clean water of the river. Fish are indeed found in abundance if you know where to look for them.

At the back of the *felucca*, my uncle has built a small *musallah* out of wooden planks. We make *wudhu* using water from the Nile River, and if possible, pray all together in the *musallah*. At the end of the day, we fry our day’s catch of fresh fish which we then eat with my mother’s delicious *aysh*. *Al-Hamdulillah* for Allah’s many, many blessings!

5. Our Village Market

Every Thursday there is an open market—the *suq al-khamees*—on the outskirts of our village. The *suq al-khamees* is an opportunity for all of us to meet up with our friends from neighbouring villages. It is here that I sometimes sell some extra eggs!

Everyone likes to visit the *suq al-khamees*. The variety of goods for sale is truly amazing. The freshest



fruits and vegetables are piled into high pyramids, but by the end of the day, these may be reduced to mere handfuls.

In the corner of the market, animals are sold: donkeys, horses, goats, sheep, water buffalo and even camels. Our village lies on the camel caravan route that begins in the Sudan and ends in the great camel market (*suq al-jamaal*), in Imbaba, a suburb of Cairo.

For the children of our village, the most exciting time is when the camel caravans pass through Al-Khayriyyah. Life in the desert is not possible without the camel, the *safinah al-sabra*, or “the ship of the desert”. Whenever I see a camel, I remember the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who like everyone during his time, owned and rode camels. I remember the story of the Prophet ﷺ when he had to migrate from Holy Makkah—the event that initiated the *hijrah* calendar. On his entering Yathreb (Al-Madinah), all *ansars* (the people of Al-Madinah who supported the Prophet) wanted the Prophet’s ﷺ camel (named *al-qaswa*) to come to rest in front of their house. The camel did stop at a place which is today the site of the Prophet’s Mosque in Al-Madinah. ‘Abu Ayyub al-Ansari (*radhi Allahu ‘anhu*), because his house was closest to where the camel stopped, became the first Companion to offer the Prophet ﷺ a place to rest in Al-Madinah.

Years ago, the black (or occasionally green) *kiswah*, or covering for the *Kaa’bah* in Holy Makkah was made in Egypt (See illustration). Each year the newly embroidered *kiswah* was transported by camel to

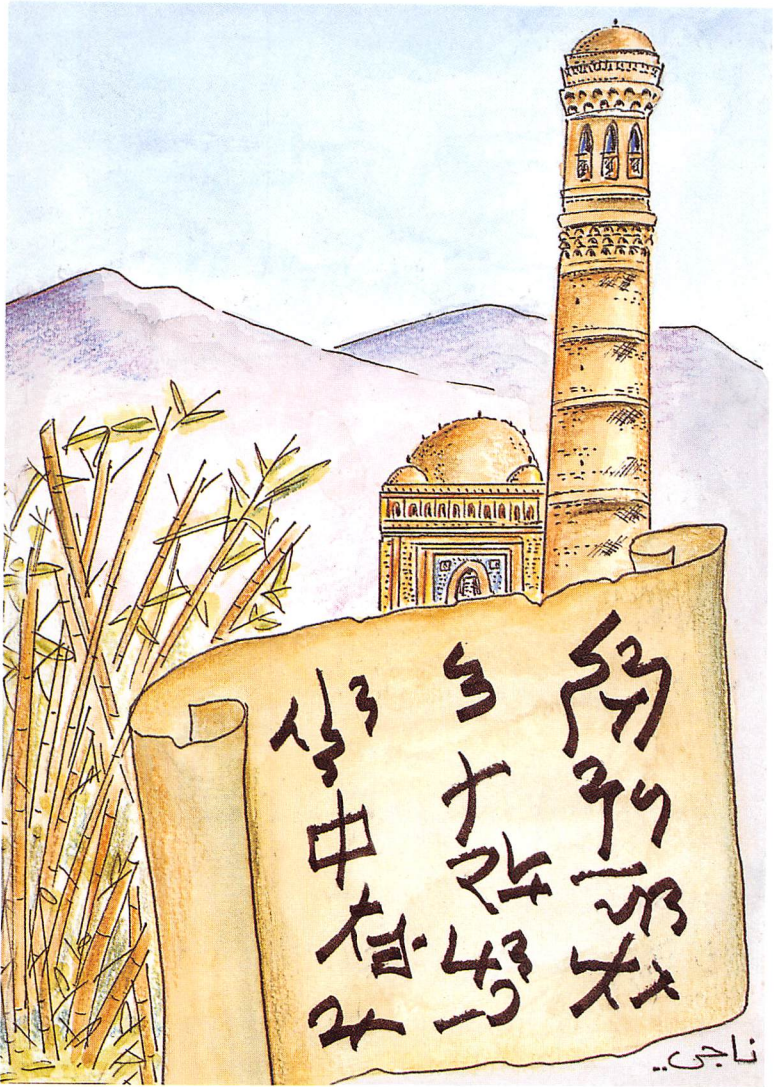
Makkah in a ceremony called the *mahmal*. My grandfather remembers a story his father told him: a camel from Al-Khayriyyah village was once chosen to carry the *kiswah* to Makkah. This was indeed an honour our village has never forgotten.

Sitting atop a camel and riding among the sand dunes behind our village, I often imagine myself a famous traveller like Ibn Battuta. But sometimes, the up and down swaying motion makes me feel “sea sick”, as if I were really sailing on a “ship in the desert”!

6. Paper making in our Village

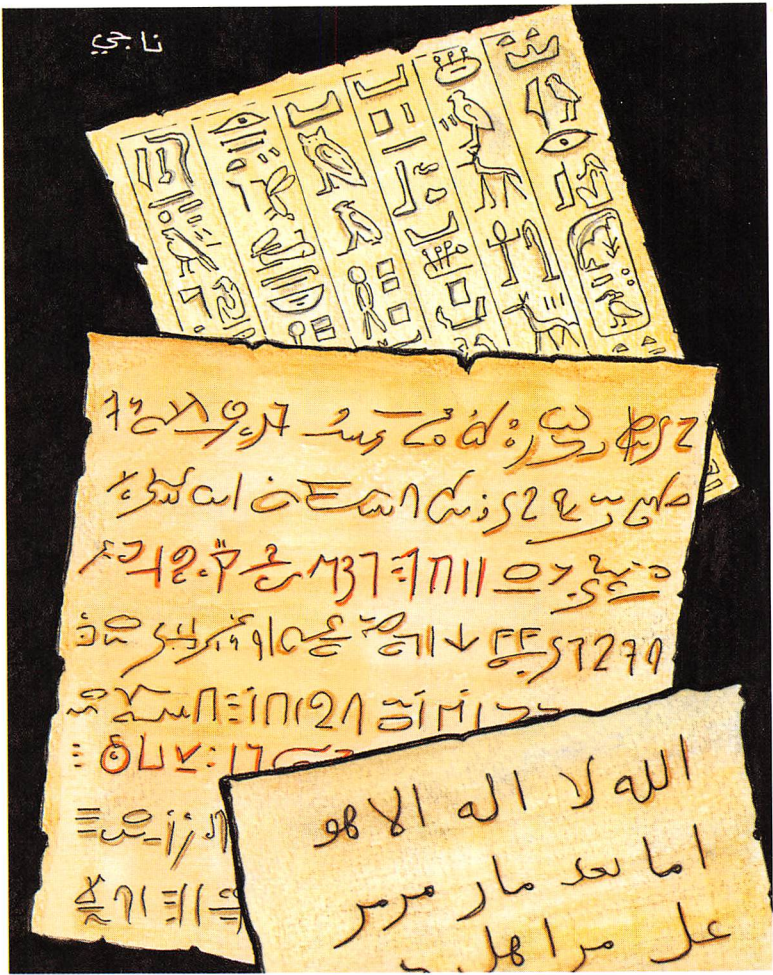
Along the banks of the Nile River grows a very important plant : papyrus. This reed can grow to a height of 1-3 metres. For thousands of years, the papyrus plant was grown and harvested because of the medicinal properties of its roots, which could also be eaten as a food. And the long sturdy stems were woven into baskets, rope and even clothing. The ancient Egyptians also invented a very durable type of paper made from papyrus.

Today, of course, we make our paper from wood pulp. Until the 8th century CE, however, Egypt was the principal supplier of papyrus paper. In other parts of the world, dried animal skin, or parchment, was often used. When the secret of Chinese papermaking was



revealed to the Arabs in the 8th century CE, the use and demand for papyrus declined. Chinese paper was cheaper to make and also had a much smoother surface.

By the end of the 11th century CE, the secret of papyrus papermaking was lost after the Egyptians



stopped making it. Some sixty years ago, however, an Egyptologist (a scientist who studies the ancient Egyptian culture) rediscovered the technique. Today, papyrus paper is once again being made in the traditional way, but is bought only by the tourists. My best friend's older brother makes sheets of papyrus paper right here in our village! In Cairo, calligraphers and artists write on them and sell the papyrus paintings to foreign

tourists. One day I visited my friend's brother and saw how this ancient form of paper is actually made.

The process of making papyrus paper involves five main steps. First, mature papyrus reeds are selected and the green outer skin are removed. The pulpy inside, or pith, is sliced into strips of equal length. These are then laid side by side to form a single sheet. A second layer is placed at right angles on top of the first. The strips used have to be wet to ensure that the gummy sap will stick the layers together. The sheets are then put under a press or heavy weight. Finally, the papyrus page is left to dry in the sun.

Papyrus paper was used for almost four thousand years in Egypt. The illustration shows ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing at the top. A simplified form of writing called heiratic script was later developed by scribes. Papyrus was even used by Muslims during the first centuries of Islam. *Al-Hamdulillah* , it is the hot dry climate in Egypt that has helped to preserve these fragile samples of early writing.

7. The Prophet Musa's connection

With the ancient step pyramid of Zoser in our backyard, everyone in Al-Khayriyyah village is aware of our long and rich history. At school, in our history class, our



teacher sometimes doesn't read from our textbook ; he just points out of the window at Zoser's pyramid and says, "Breathe in your history, children!"

The Holy Qur'an has also helped us understand who we are as Egyptians. *Kitab Allah* has made our distant past seem very real to us, *al-Hamdulillah*. There are many references to the land of *misr* (Egypt) in the

Qur'an. In *surah al-a'raf* – *ayahs* 103 –105, for example, the Prophet Musa (*'alayhi al-salaam*) and his encounter with the Pharaoh is described:

After those (early people) We sent Musa with Our message unto Pharaoh and his great ones, and they willfully rejected them: and behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption!

And Musa said: “O Pharaoh! Verily, I am an apostle from the Sustainer of all the worlds, so constituted that I cannot say anything about Allah but the truth. I have now come unto you with a clear evidence from your Sustainer: let, then, the Children of Israel go with me!”

No one knows the precise spot along the banks of the Nile River where the baby Musa (*'aleyhi al-salaam*) was set afloat by his mother. Thousands of years have passed and most of the descendents of the Pharaoh and his people are Muslims, *al-Hamdulillah*. Today, when we read these beautiful verses from Allah's Book, we can almost hear Musa's (*'aleyhi al-salaam*) commanding voice ringing out in the hot, clear Egyptian air.

Allah asks us to ponder on the fate of the “spreaders of corruption”. Some people say the mummified body of the pharaoh from the time of Musa (*'aleyhi al-salaam*) is resting in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. *Allah-u a'alam*. What is certain is those who rejected Allah's Message, truly suffered a terrible fate.

As children, we love to play and hide among the sand dunes beyond our village. Sometimes we dig in the hot, yellow sand. Last year, my friend and I discovered a small burial tomb from the time of the pharaohs. It had been robbed of its precious contents long, long ago. What I did find, however, was this beautiful model boat made of painted wood. It represented a pharaoh's funeral barge. Before giving the boat to the government authorities, my friend and I first took it to the banks of the Nile. We wanted to see if the boat could actually float. In my village we are always "breathing history!"

8. Date Palms of our Village

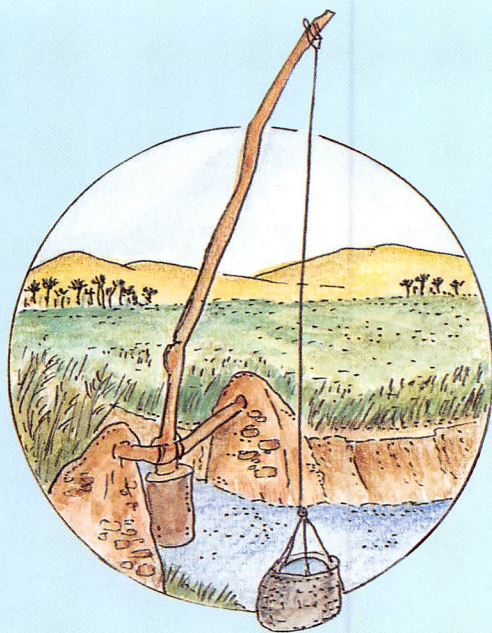
Egypt is the world's largest producer of dates. Date groves can be seen all along the Nile River and also in many desert oases all over the country. The English word "oasis" itself comes from the ancient Coptic Egyptian word *wabe*. Even our Arabic word for "oasis" *waha* is derived from the same source!

For as long as people have lived along the Nile and in well-watered desert oases, dates have been grown and harvested. The date tree is extremely important in our culture. Allah mentions it almost twenty times in the Holy Qur'an. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in a beautiful *hadith* likened a good Muslim to a date palm:



“Among trees, there is a tree like a Muslim. Its leaves do not fall.”

Because the date is such a nutritious and healthful food, the Prophet ﷺ advised Muslims to break their fast with dates.



The shadoof is a very ancient but practical device used to lift water from a well or, as shown here, from the Nile River. It consists of a long balanced pole with a rope attached to a bucket at the thinner end and a heavy weight at the thicker end. The shadoof is simple, but extremely efficient in irrigating the fields around Al-Khayriyyah village. It is possible that a much larger shadoof-like device might have been used to raise the many one tonne stone slabs that were needed to build the pyramids of Egypt.

The date palms you see here are part of my uncle's date grove. During harvest time in late summer or early fall (September or October), we all help him pick and transport the delicious fruit for sale. *Al-Hamdulillah*, our date trees have a constant supply of fresh water, but they can even survive if irrigated with salty or brackish water.

Only the female date palm bears fruit when it is about eight years old, but it must be twenty years old to produce a full crop. One healthy tree can produce between 50 to 100 kilos of dates! We regularly prune or cut off dead branches from the top of the tree to enable it to grow. The stumps of the branches form convenient steps for us to climb the trees. I can climb at the top of a tall tree in less than a minute in bare feet!

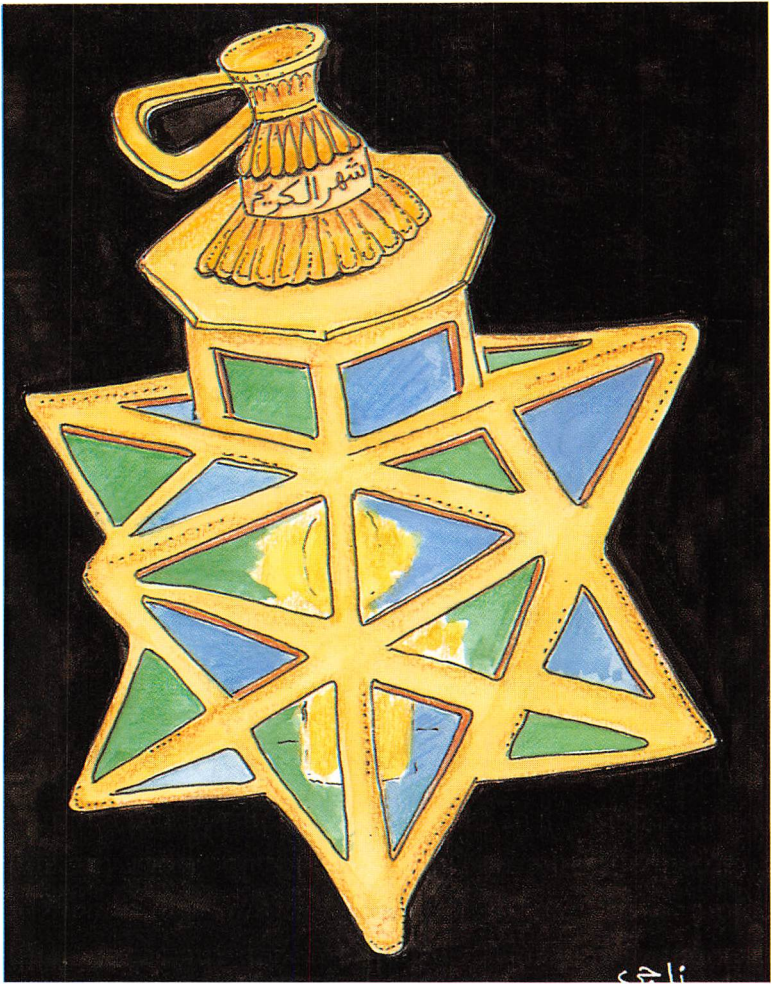
Masha' Allah, the date palm is an extremely versatile tree. Its dried branches provide material for brooms and matting; a fibre for rope and sacks; and even the date stones can be ground into a powder to feed cattle.

On the edge of the date grove is my uncle's pigeon tower or *burg al-hamaam*, as we call it in Egyptian Arabic. He raises pigeons that nest inside the white-washed mud tower. We only eat grilled pigeons on special occasions. The birds' droppings are used as a fertilizer for the surrounding fields.

Insha' Allah, we will all be good Muslims: tall, straight and sturdy like the blessed date palm, the *shajarah al-mubarakah*.

9. Ramadan in our village

The month of Ramadhan, *al-shahr al-rahmah*, is eagerly awaited each year by Muslims the world over. Each Muslim country has special traditions to welcome and celebrate this blessed month. Here in *Al-Khayriyyah*



village, we have continued with some very old practices during the month of fasting.

Life changes when Ramadhan begins. Our mosque becomes the centre of much activity during the month. We all try and spend as much time as we can here reading the Holy Qur'an. Special *qari's*, or reciters of the Holy Qur'an, always read long *surahs* before each *salah* . *Masha' Allah*, as in all Muslim countries, by

continual recitation and remembrance of Allah's Word, Muslims try to draw themselves closer to *al-Khaliq*, the Creator of this Universe.

In our village, an old Islamic custom is still alive. Each morning, in the middle of the night, well before the rooster crows, the loud sound of a beating drum wakes us up. The *musabarti* passes in front of our houses. He is a local villager who each and every morning during Ramadhan walks along the dark alleys of our village calling everyone to wake up for *sahoor* (the pre-dawn meal) and *fajr* prayers.

Many special foods and drinks are prepared during Ramadhan, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ advised us to break our fast with *tamr* (dates). We save the best dates from my uncle's trees especially for this month. Our *'iftaar* includes freshly baked *aysh*, *ful medammes*, *zabadi* (fresh yogurt), and *torshi baladi* (home-made pickles). My mother also makes a delicious juice made from dried apricots called *qamar al-din*.

Each evening during *al-shahr al-rahmah* , the children of our village parade through the streets with coloured *fawanis* or lanterns. *Fawanis Ramadhan* or "Ramadhan lanterns" are made locally from tin and coloured glass. A lit candle is placed inside and children wander the streets with their swinging *fawanis* and sing:

*"wahawi, ya wahawi iyyahab
hall hilal mubarak 'alayna
'agma 'in ramadhan kareem!"*

*“Light of fire; light of fire. Your
crescent moon has appeared.
A blessed month to one and
all! Ramadhan Kareem!”*

This is my new *fanoos* or lantern which I have just bought. Isn't it beautiful?

Insha' Allah , our *niyyah* (intention), all our prayers, and our *al-'amaal al-saalehah* (good deeds) during this month will be accepted. May we all be blessed with the arrival of yet another Ramadhan!

10. Eid Celebrations

“Farewell, Blessed Ramadhan!” *al-wada' shahr ramadhan al-kareem!* Now it is *'eid al-fitr*. As you can see, our whole village is celebrating the end of Ramadhan.

In front of the mosque is a colourful hand-sewn tent called *suradeq*. This huge tent pavilion was set up to enable villagers to meet and greet each other under one roof. Tents like this are very difficult to make. Only a few master tentmakers still know this ancient craft.

They work in the Street of the Tentmakers in old Cairo and spend many months just to sew one tent. Hundreds of colourful panels made from individual pieces of cotton material are eventually sewn together to make the “walls” of the tent. Our *imam* bought this *suradeq* from Cairo, and it is used on the occasions of two *'eids*, weddings and many other special occasions.



Every year on the second day of *'eid* , my father takes us all to Cairo to visit some of our relatives. A trip into the big city is always a treat. We also try to pray in the Mosque of 'Amr ibn al-'As (*radhi Allahu 'anhu*) at least once when we are there.

In the year 21 AH (641 CE), "Amr ibn al-'As (*radhi Allhu 'anhu*) arrived in Egypt and pitched his camp at *al-Fustat*, a district which is today known as Old Cairo. The mosque was built on the site of the tent of 'Amr ibn *al-'As*. Today, it is not only the oldest surviving mosque in Cairo, but the oldest in the whole of Africa. *Al-Fustat* soon became a centre of Islamic learning and this mosque housed more than 5,000 students!

'Amr ibn al'As is loved by all Egyptians. We remember his conversion to Islam in the eighth year of the *hijrah*. 'Amr refused to shake the hand of the Prophet ﷺ and pledge his allegiance to him because he wanted a guarantee that all his previous sins should be forgiven. The Prophet ﷺ immediately responded: "(Embracing) Islam and *hijrah* expiate all previous sins." With this clarification, "Amr entered the fold of Islam, *al-Hamdulillah*.

What amazing successes he had in the Way of Allah. 'Amr headed an army which eventually liberated the city of Jerusalem, and he is most remembered for introducing Islam to the land of Egypt. From Egypt, Muslims marched westward bringing the message of *din al-haqq al-Islam* to the people of North Africa and Europe. May Allah be pleased with 'Amr ibn al-'As, a truly noble Companion of the Prophet ﷺ.

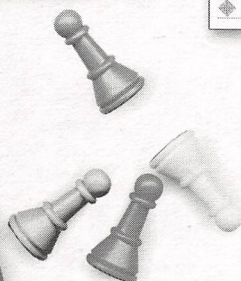
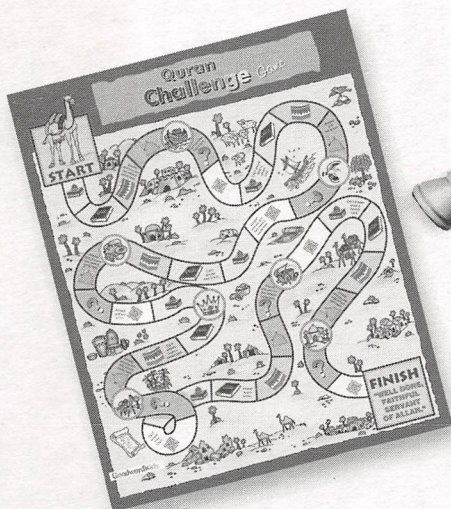
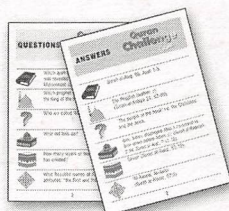
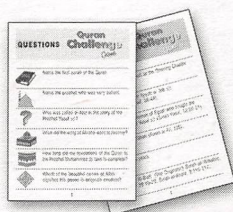
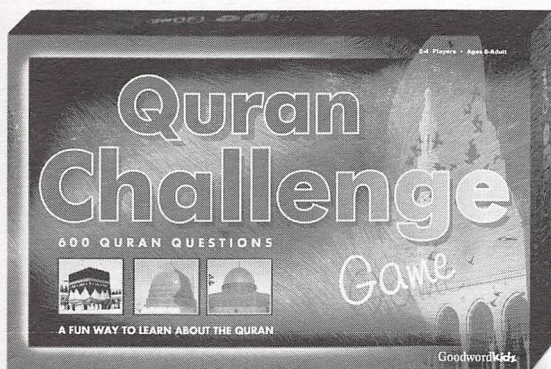
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My Egyptian Village

This book tells you the story of a beautiful village of Egypt as seen through the eyes of a young Egyptian boy 'Abd Kareem. He will tell you many wonderful things about his village situated on the banks of the River Nile. Through this book you will really be able to appreciate the importance of history, tradition and culture in the lives of Al-Khayriyyah villagers.

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My Turkish Village

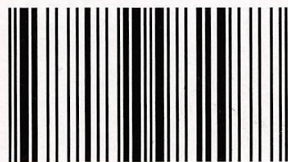
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